

Meeting Peter Singer

I remember watching an episode of *Penn & Teller* about animal rights. As usual, the show mostly consisted of a long series of clips relating to animal rights, followed by comments from Penn making fun of the idea. This show, I recall, was particularly weak. They didn't even pretend to make an argument; it was entirely mockery.

Watching this, I couldn't help but realize there was a powerful logical argument at the core of the animal rights groups: animals should be treated much the same way humans are — their lives should be respected, their pain minimized, etc. Make this one simple change to your system of morality and everything else falls into place. PETA actually seems kind of measured when they refer to “the Holocaust on your plate”.

Peter Singer is the moral philosopher who has probably done the most to promote this idea. With a wide-ranging career spanning from Marx to meat, his book *Animal Liberation*, which quietly and thoughtfully makes this case, is widely-regarded as launching the animal liberation movement.

I was recently dragged to the Boston Vegetarian Festival to see Singer speak about his new book, *The Way We Eat*, and was deeply impressed by his thoughtfulness and clarity of mind. An aging fellow with thoughtful glasses, he looks like Noam Chomsky, another plainspoken professor. He is not a passionate activist who has taken on the cause of animals, but simply what he appears: a moral philosopher who started thinking about the issue one day and drew the logical conclusions.

After his talk, a woman in the audience asked a question about the rumors that he would sometimes eat non-vegan food. The audience was scandalized. “Let me address that,” Singer said. “I don't believe in veganism as a religion. I simply believe that refraining from eating animal products is the most effective way of putting pressure on producers to stop abusing and killing animals. Sometimes, if a host misunderstands my request and makes non-vegan food, instead of throwing it away, I will eat it. I don't think this is a problem, because I don't think this does any moral harm.”

Another person asked how he could say good things about Whole Foods when they were still serving numerous animal products. “Whole Foods has the best standards for animal treatment of any major organization,” he replied. “That's simply a fact. And, I think it's a good thing. Do I think not using animals at all would be even better? Of course. But I praise people for the good things they do and condemn them for the bad ones.”

A final question raised the incrementalism versus revolutionism debate common to all left-wing social movements. Should one really worry about animal treatment when the animals were still going to be killed? Pinger said the answer was undoubtedly yes. “Look, I thought that when *Animal Liberation* came out everyone would read it and become a vegan. But it's been thirty years and vegans are still less than 10% of the population. If you genuinely care about animal suffering, you have to admit that, and say, ‘what else can we do to ease animal suffering?’”

After Singer's talk, I began thinking through the consequences of his morality. A question occurred to me: “Should we also stop animals from eating each other?” I was sure others had made such arguments as *reductio ad absurdums* of vegetarianism, but I thought I might be the first to be genuinely interested in it from a moral perspective.

“Of course not,” said my friend. “It's not our fault if the animals kill each other.” “You mean,” I said, “that you think it's perfectly moral to let that guy” — I pointed at a random guy nearby — “go around killing people?” “Well, OK,” he said. “But it's different with animals, because they don't know any better.” “You mean it would be OK to let him go around killing people if he was mentally ill and didn't realize he was doing it?” “You should go ask Singer,” he said.

So I did — he was signing books outside the lecture hall and as the line ended I asked him my question. His answer was even better than I imagined: “We would if we knew how to do so without making things worse and disturbing the ecosystems and so on.” “Thanks!” I said, impressed. He spied the large white book I was hugging to my chest. “Are you reading Kolakowski?” he asked. “Yep,” I said smiling. “Had to read that when I was studying Marx a long time ago. It's heavy,” he said. “Quite literally!” I replied, hefting the 1200 page book. He smiled.

“I have to say, though,” I said, feeling guilty, “that I don't agree with your *Darwinian Left* stuff.” “That's OK,” he replied. “You don't need to agree with everything I write.” Then he wandered off, looking for the next thing to see.

I had to get that off my chest, because it was the one thing bugging me about Singer. Somehow later in life Singer had become a sociobiologist, one of that vulgar group of psuedoscientists who insist — despite all evidence — that humans are genetically programmed to do all everything a right-wing politician could imagine. (Sociobiology having gotten a bad name, they now call themselves evolutionary psychologists.)

In his book *A Darwinian Left*, however, Singer explains that this is no reason for the left to despair. If people are actually born stupid, that's only *more* justification for left-wing policies. We need to provide the stupid people with the extra resources to live on equal terms as the smart people. Steven Pinker cites this book (along with Singer's *The Expanding Circle*) several times in his execrable *Blank Slate* to prove that his noxious views aren't necessarily right-wing. (Neither Pinker nor Singer, of course, provide any real evidence to show this actually is the way humans are.)

That said, as usual Singer's conclusions do follow from his premises — if you do make that one small change to the way you think the world works, then his conclusions about what we should do to remedy it undoubtedly follow. I just wish he'd check his assumptions.

That aside, it seems unfair to dismiss Singer on the basis of a small blemish on an incredibly long and varied career — *Wikipedia* lists over forty books he's written or co-authored. His thoughtfulness and clarity in sharing it is an example to us all.

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